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ABSTRACT

It was hypothesized that women in different current life circumstances would emphasize different life content areas in verbal reports of their life histories. A basically homogeneous sample of 30 women (average age = 58.5) was divided into women who had never had children, women whose children had left home, and women who had at least one child living at home. Life history interviews focused on events self-selected by the subjects. The results were coded into 11 content areas derived from the data. ANOVA tests indicated differences for four of the areas. Multiple Range tests showed the empty-nest women as the most likely to mention Family or Procreation, and the non-empty-nest women were the most likely to report Self memories. A t-test showed no difference in interest in children with the empty-nest women, but there was an increase in the importance of the husband which appeared to be at the expense of Self concerns. The subjects were similar in their overall life situations and, in accordance with the hypothesis, showed the same basic pattern in the content of their remembered pasts. However, differences in current life circumstances did create meaningful alterations in memory of the past. (Author/PJC)

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RECONSTRUCTION OF THE PERSONAL PAST:
DIFFERENCES IN OLDER WOMEN

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Before I report a study of change at midlife, I would like to describe some of the ideas behind my title phrase, "Reconstruction of the Past." Basically, reconstruction implies that we are not concerned with a single, authentic past nor with a single once-and-for-all adulthood. Instead, the individual's memories of the personal past are viewed as undergoing constant reinterpretation and such memories are more or less accessible as a function of current developmental status and psychological state. The thesis, derived in large part from the point of view of ego psychology (eg., Cottle and Klineberg, 1974; Kelly, 1963; Kris, 1952; Loewald, 1962, 1976; Novey, 1968; Rapaport, 1942; Schimek, 1975; Wyatt, 1963), is that there is an ongoing process within adult development in which the ego differentially recruits and actively combines material from the past for present adaptive and creative functioning. One purpose behind doing such reconstruction is that individuals need to maintain a sense of personal continuity and predictability in life in order to function (Back, 1976; Cottle and Klineberg, 1974; Lecky, 1969; Lewis, 1973; Loewald, 1973; Kris, 1952; Marris, 1975; Novey, 1968; Wyatt, 1963). At last year's meeting of the Gerontological Society, Harvey Peskin presented a further development of the idea. He proposed that the spontaneous return of past materials, including those of stressful content and affect, can be understood as an adult life span project to enlarge the boundaries of the self. Conversely,

during times of change or stress, one would expect to see a narrowing or constriction in ego identity and, thus, in the amount and type of material people would call up from their pasts (Paskin and Gigy, 1977).

From this theory, we propose that the process of reconstruction goes on continually throughout life but should be particularly evident and observable in times of major change or disruption in a life's ongoing pattern. The emptynest has been identified by many authors as such a disruptive period in the lives of mothers (eg., Spence and Lonner, 1971; Lowenthal and Chiribiga, 1972). To be sure, the transition to the emptynest is a highly complex issue. It is even difficult to define when the emptynest really occurs. It may also carry different meanings, not only among different women but within the same women for different children or, even, a given woman may have ambivalent feelings about any one of her children. However, regardless of her response to it, at base, the transition to the emptynest represents a significant change in a mother's role in relation to her children and usually in her general daily activities as well. It is this change to the emptynest which is the focus of the study I'm reporting here. The respondents in the study consisted of three groups of women: the first still had one or more children living at home, the second group's children had all left the home, and a third group of women who had never had any children was included for purposes of comparison. The hypothesis of the study was that women in these three different current life circumstances of

child status would exhibit differences in the patterns of their remembered life events. Emptynest theory would lead us to expect that the women whose children had left home would have memory content reflecting their attempts at adaptation to loss. That is to say, the emptynest women should recall their pasts differently because they would find different material helpful in their changed status. The problem was to determine what specific life history content areas, such as family of procreation, would receive different emphasis because of the change in status.

Sample: The sample for the study was taken from a larger, longitudinal study of men and women facing normative adulthood transitions (ref. Lowenthal, Thurnher and Chiriboga, 1975). The larger sample had been selected to be as homogeneous as possible in regard to SES, race and urban environment. The group used in the research reported here consisted of 30 women ranging in age from 45 to 67, with a mean age of 58.5. They all were either facing their own or their husband's retirement. Coming as they did from a homogeneous larger sample, there was no reason to believe there would be any systematic differences among their actual, or authentic, pasts. Of these 30 women, 7 never had children, 14 had children who had all left home and 9 had at least one child still living at home.

Procedure: As part of the baseline interview of the longitudinal study, the sample was asked to fill out a "Life Evaluation Chart" in which they were to rate each of the years of their lives on a scale from 1, for rock bottom, to 9, for absolute tops. This

chart was used as a basis for a life history interview which focused on the events reflected in rating changes across the entire life. Thus it can be assumed that the respondents spontaneously selected the material they chose to report. The content of the life histories was coded into 11 categories derived from the data through simple counts of the manifest content. Only two response items were uncodable in the system. so, essentially, all the material was included in the coding. The categories, which are shown in Table 1, are Family of Origin; Family of Procreation which included mentions of the respondents' husbands and children; Self States such as "I learned not to worry," "I felt free and on my own," "I was getting less timid," or "I got the feeling I was no good for anything;" Work which referred to the respondent's own job or work outside the home; Social which included mentions of friends or people outside the respondent's family; Health which referred to the respondent's own physical health (Mental health items were coded under Self States and the health of family members was coded under the appropriate family code); Fun was any mention of enjoyed activities such as trips or hobbies; Material concerns, any mention of financial difficulties or prosperity (It also included purchases, other than a house, and such things as "I got new clothes for school."); House is purchasing a house; Moves refers to relocating residence and School was any mention of school work or school related activities. In order to control for individual differences in the amount of

verbal response, these tallies were converted into percentages of the sum of the items mentioned for each individual.

Before doing the actual analysis of the data, two possible problems were taken into consideration. First, it was thought that age might be related to the independent variable, child status, and this was born out. The women whose children were still at home were significantly younger, by a mean of about seven years, than the women whose children had left home. The childless women were intermediate. Thus there was a possibility of age confounding the results of the study but when Pearson r 's were done between age and each of the dependent variables, only one significant relationship was produced. The r between Moves and age was $-.45$, $P = .012$, and, as can be seen on Table 1, there was no significant difference among the groups for Moves. Also the range of the r 's (excluding the one for moves) was from $.05$ to $.19$ with a mean magnitude of $.106$. Because these were so low, it was concluded that age did not confound the results to any meaningful extent. The second problem was that percentages were used so the categories were not completely independent. Concern thus arose about whether it was appropriate to use a series of ANOVAs to test the hypothesis. A complete correlation matrix was done for the 11 dependent variables and only four were significant, which is not very different from what could be expected by chance alone. It was thus concluded that the degree of inter-relationship among the variables was not a problem either.

Results: The actual data analysis did show support for the hypothesized differences in memory patterns among the groups. As indicated on Table 1 and Figure 1, two ANOVAs were significant at $P < .05$ and two more at $P < .10$. The Duncan's Multiple Range tests for these four relationships were all significant at $P < .05$ and indicated interesting relationships among the groups. The women whose children had left home were the most likely to mention memories of the Family of Procreation and they were the least likely of the groups to report memories of Self, Work or House buying. The women with children still at home were the group most likely to report Self memories and they differed significantly in that respect from the emptynest women. These results could not be attributed to any expectable difference in the authentic pasts of the two groups.

Because of the strong relationship between Family of Procreation and the emptynest, I did further analysis to see if the empty- and non-emptynest groups differed in emphasis on their children or on their husbands. A t-test comparing the percentages of items for children indicated that there was no difference between the two groups of women. One can infer from this that there is no change in the importance of their children in these women's lives after the children have left home. On the other hand, the emptynest women were considerably more likely than the non-emptynest women to focus on their husbands ($t=2.67$, 21 df, $P < .02$). Thus while there is no decline of interest in children with the emptynest, there is

an increase in the importance of the husband in the life history. The emptynest women's focus of interest did not turn from their children to their husbands but, instead, it turned from themselves to their husbands. This is evidenced by the fact that they gave comparatively few spontaneous responses in the Self category while they frequently mentioned their husbands in the Family of Procreation category.

Discussion: We have been working with the idea that one reconstructs the personal past in accordance with the current life situation. Using this idea, one could speculate that these emptynest women have focused on a time in their pasts which is consistent with, and therefore useful to them while they are dealing with, their current status. They may be recapitulating the time of early marriage before they had children. Given this was a lower middle class, socially conservative, sample, there is evidence that, for them, the newlywed status probably involved a strong identification with the new husband and role of wife at the expense of more self-centered, independent identities. It may be that these women did not have self-sustaining past experiences of independence to call upon because these experiences did not occur concurrently with the only previous time they were living alone with their husbands. Thus one speculation may be that, in order to attain a sense of self-consistency, these women were using the period in their pasts which was most like their current situation. Another, not mutually exclusive, possibility might be that these emptynest women were exhibiting

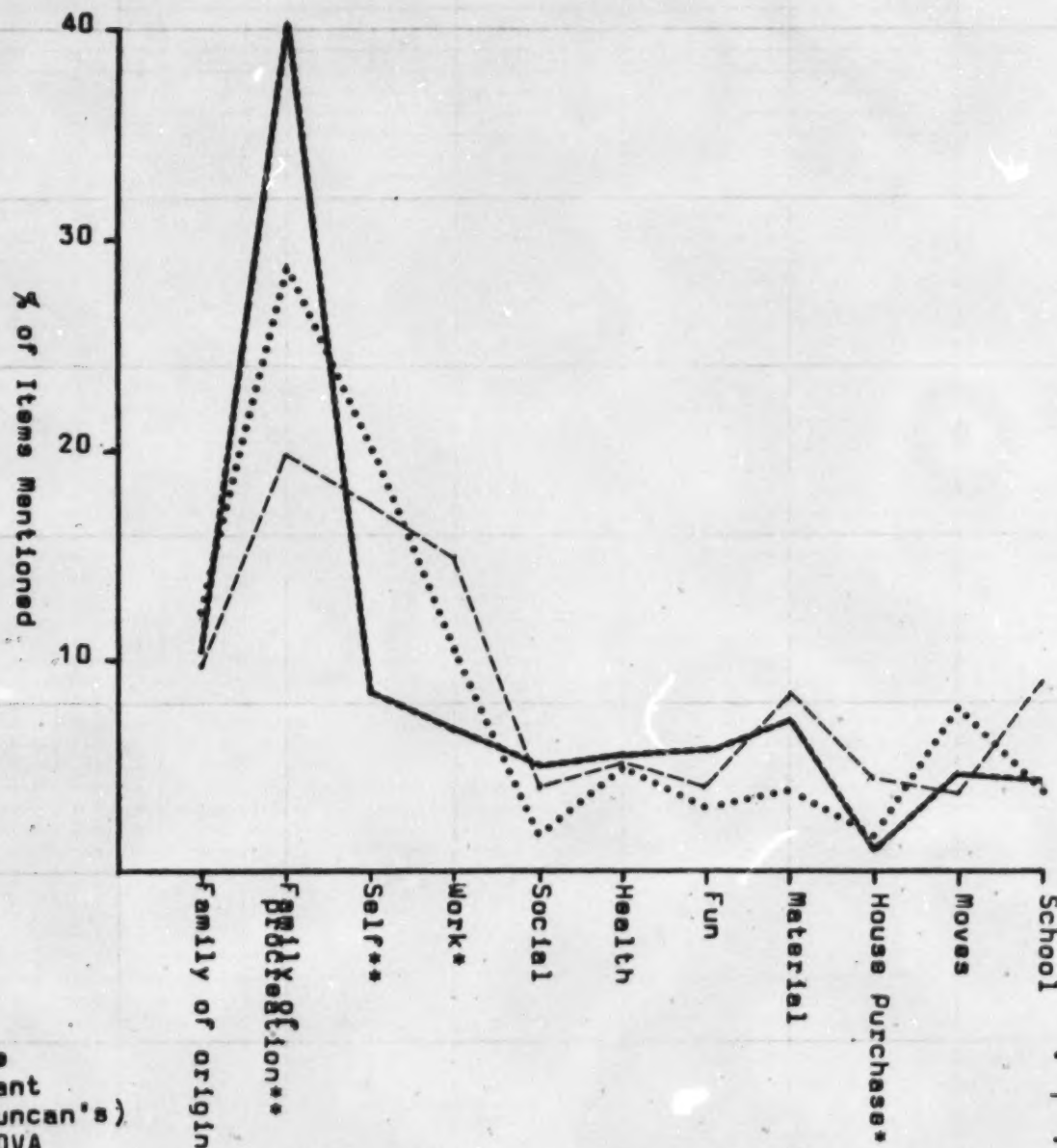
ego constriction in response to a difficult change in their lives. They may have been recalling a narrow range of useful material because they needed to focus their energy on coping with their current status rather than on issues from the past. Thus they may have been both constricting the self-identities to focus energy on the problem at hand and limiting their memories to the past material which was consistent with and therefore directly relevant to their current situation.

However, in summary, the purpose of this research was simply to test the hypothesis that current life circumstances would significantly alter one's perception of the content of one's personal past. This implies that people in similar circumstances should manifest similar patterns in the content of their remembered pasts but that there should be appropriate differences in the patterns if one systematic variable is introduced. The respondents in the study were quite similar in overall life situations. They were all white, middle class, urban women with basically similar life histories. Thus one would expect the same basic patterning in the contents of their remembered pasts and the graph (Figure 1) does show similar overall patterns. However, as we have seen, some systematic and significant shifts emerge from the control of the child status variable. Therefore, while the basic pattern remains stable, differences in current life circumstances can create meaningful alterations in memory, or reconstructions of the personal past, and can shed some light on the impact of the change to the emptynest.

Table 1: Life Content Areas by Child Status

	<u>F(2 df) P=</u>	<u>Mean Percentages</u> <u>Children:</u>			<u>Duncan's Mult.</u> <u>Range test results</u>
		<u>None</u>	<u>Home</u>	<u>Gone</u>	
Family of Origin	0.13 .878	9.86	11.78	11.36	NS (at .05)
Family of Procreation	8.44 .002	19.71	28.78	40.28	None, Home/Gone
Self States	3.34 .049	17.57	19.33	8.43	Gone, None/None, Home
Work	2.58 .093	14.86	10.44	6.86	Gone, Home/Home, None
Social	0.96 .398	4.00	1.78	4.93	NS
Health	0.01 .983	5.29	5.11	5.50	NS
Fun	0.67 .527	4.00	3.11	5.64	NS
Material	0.85 .442	8.14	3.89	7.07	NS
House	3.15 .058	4.57	1.56	0.93	Gone, Home/Home, None
Moves	1.84 .176	3.71	9.67	4.71	NS
School	1.80 .182	8.86	4.22	4.43	NS
N. Items	0.47 .637	23.29	29.67	25.14	NS
N. Categories	0.62 .550	8.00	7.56	7.00	NS

Figure 1: Life Content Areas by Child Status



* Difference significant
 $P < .05$ (Duncan's)
 $P < .10$ ANOVA
 ** ANOVA $P < .05$

..... Child(ren) at Home
 ---- Childless
 — Children Have Left

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